



Review of 'UN Studio. Design Models. Architecture. Urbanism. Infrastructure'

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**UN STUDIO:
DESIGN MODELS
ARCHITECTURE.
URBANISM.
INFRASTRUCTURE**

By Ben van Berkel and Caroline Bos

The combination of an art historian and an architect running an architectural practice is perhaps unusual, but then UN Studio (formerly known as Van Berkel & Bos Architecture Bureau) is perhaps something of an exception to the rule. Independently they have been graphic designers, writers and journalists. They were both correspondents for *De Volkskrant* - writing about the London art and architecture scene. Caroline Bos and Ben van Berkel were also amongst the first to explore a multi-disciplinary approach that is more akin to a network than a traditional practice and which provides their office with a collective of skills, energies and abilities. 'Delinquent Visionaries' published in 1993 - a collection of unusual essays - revealed their interest in publications as a useful medium to express their ideas.

'Design Models' is their latest book and it collates projects across a wide spectrum of locations and programmes. Bringing up to date a number of recently completed buildings as well as revisiting some earlier ones, the book is organised into a thematic framework into which the individual projects are structured. Sections such as: inclusive principle, mathematical model, V-model, blob-to-box and deep planning principle, are framed by an introductory essays that discusses "...the abolition of design" (and replacement by their notion of 'design models') and a concluding essay on architecture's dependency on the image, called 'after image'.

**UN Studio
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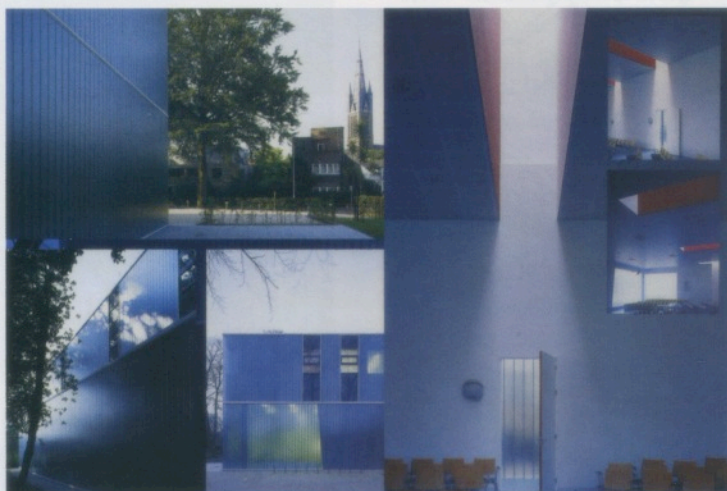
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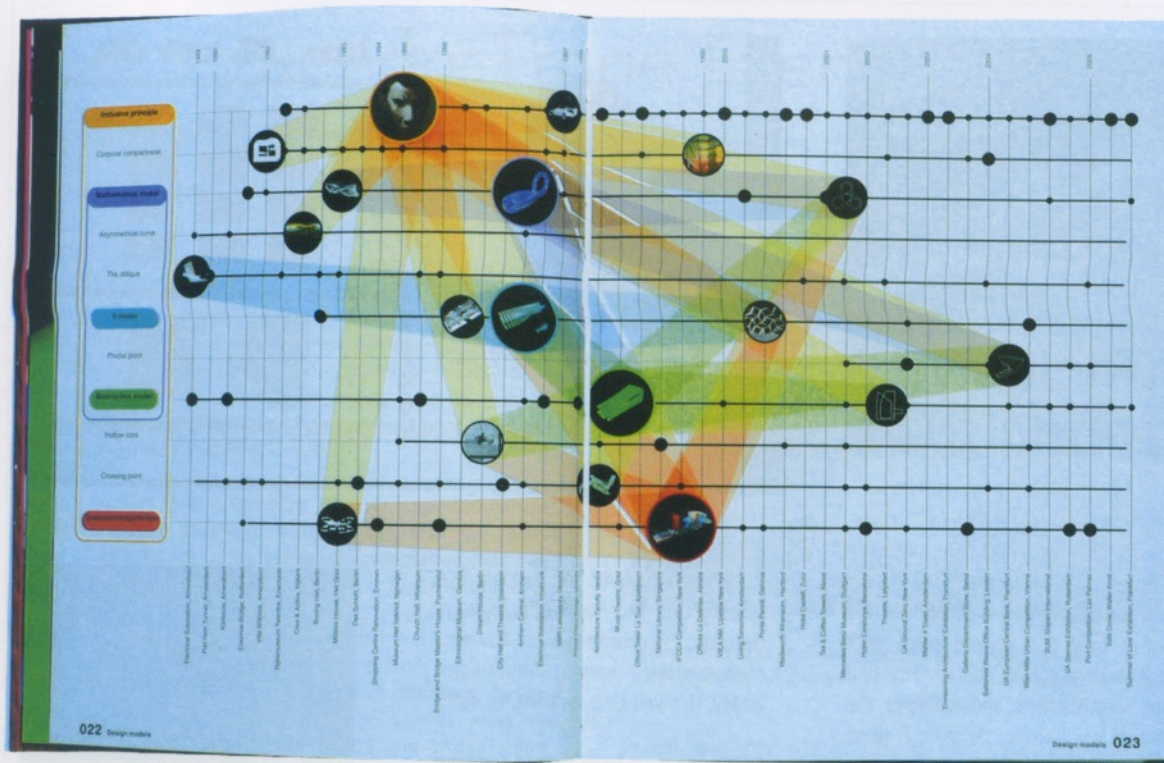
"At first glance, it appears their own work is heavily dependant on digital manipulation but for them only as a means to an end. What separates them from many of their contemporaries is their emphasis on realising the built work."

Amidst the book at frequent intervals are double page spreads in vibrant colours and jarring text titled 'Positive notes'. These offer various words of wisdom as asides to the flow of project explanations. They are a sort of ironic "reasons to be cheerful", calling out from within the pressure cooker of architectural practice. At

times these delphic mutterings tap into revealing profundities: "...isn't it great to cross cultures and build a fantastical hybrid retail-museum-office-living-space..." (Positive note 1) and, "...architects age really well...there is no need to get bored..." (Positive note 4). Whew, that's a relief. But more later.

Central to the approach and philosophy of UN Studio is their concept of 'design models', from which the book takes its title. Critical of the saturation of architecture by research - which is often so abstract as to be useless in practice - their own research investigates spatial and organisational devices that already exist or have been discovered in science or related disciplines. These 'design models' are in effect similar to mathematical figures or three-dimensional systems. They are not diagrams of buildings in the traditional sense, or typologies, but ▶





▶ more like scientific patterns or conditions, which can be usefully imported into architecture. The Möbius strip, the Trefoil and the Klien Bottle are some of the 'models' they have utilized and in turn have transferred from project to project. They set up computer simulations of these systems and then engage it with a particular project. Charts in the book aim to track the relevance and development of the 'models' across the body of their work.

Time for another 'Positive note' (5a and 5b): "...Thank God that architecture is not art. Do architects kill themselves, cut off body parts, and imbibe dramatic quantities of dangerous substances...we end up sculpting the statistics, painting with information in bold, brutal brushstrokes or refined minimal gestures like any old artist." Such is our fate.

The Villa at Wilbrink, the shed at Karbouw and the Möbius House are all signature works that have been well discussed and debated. But the Erasmus Bridge is so far the practice's 'Billbao'. When Riek Bakker (head of the Kop van Zuid Plan) rejected the design put forward for the bridge by the public works engineers - in favour UN Studio's design some 40million guilders more expensive- it was a decision to aim for quality. This

'design investment' has established the bridge as both a physical enabler for development and a symbol of Rotterdam's regeneration. The design, construction and assembly across the expanse of the river Maas was nothing short of remarkable. In the book the project is underplayed in favour of new work, and like Bilbao has of course resulted in the practice being asked to do several other 'bridges'. Apart from one in Utrecht they have so far resisted.

A house in upstate New York, the museum Het Valkhof, the NMR Laboratory in Utrecht, a hotel in Switzerland and the large development of Arnhem Central

reveal a range and diversity of work. Amidst large urban schemes and development plans they have also designed several exhibition layouts, unusual pieces of furniture and the most extraordinary tea and coffee set on the planet.

"Not that everyone loves our work, but that the good thing about producing a building is that people keep interacting with it for a long time...more so than a new film or novel..." (Positive note 6). There is no escape.

A modest church hall in Hilversum and the beautiful unbuilt project awarded 2nd prize for the ►



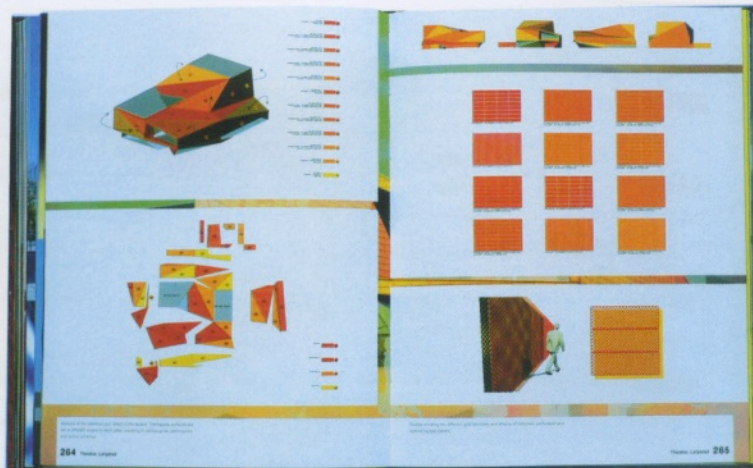
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► Architecture Faculty in Venice, reveal their abilities. The later in particular brings together a clever and compact organisational structure (what they call hollow core) with material and constructional ideas that are sophisticated and sublime. But Venice is a notoriously difficult place for contemporary architecture and UN Studio have been able to deploy their energies elsewhere.

The just completed Mercedes-Benz Museum in Stuttgart is the focus of all current media attention on their work. Its trefoil plan -like the car emblem- is a spiral of three forms curving and bending in its floor plates and weaving its way as a continuous sequence. Looming on the edge of the autobahn like a supercharged engine ready to fire up, this silver spiral best illustrates the fruits of their 'design models': in plan a seemingly simple trefoil but in spatial and constructional terms extraordinary. A silo to contain the history of Mercedes vehicles, its formal

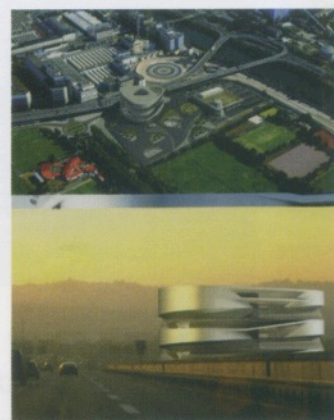


restlessness seems to swoop the passing cars and roads into its large central chamber. German craftsmanship meets Superdutch ability. This will be a building to visit.

UN Studio have been able to combine teaching and writing as an important part of their practice. In the book they confess: "...there is nothing like teaching to open your eyes to the pitfalls of design..." and express a dissatisfaction with the endless "...repetition of fantasy..." which is propagated by the digital realm. At first glance, it appears their own work is heavily dependant on digital manipulation but for them only as a means to an end. What separates them from many of their contemporaries is their emphasis on realising the built work.

"...architects will be increasingly hired as consultants...the risks of this working mode is obvious...you may find your name associated with a finished product that is horrendously embarrassing...but never mind sooner or later that will happen anyway..." (Positive note 9). Resistance is futile.

Through the projects and texts in this book some of the pleasures, contradictions and seductions of architecture are disclosed. While the three-volume 'move' (published in 1999) connected UN Studio's architecture to a myriad of contemporary phenomena and was brash, fast and refreshing; 'Design



Models' is a safer, more robust and mature archetypal monograph.

Let's end on a 'Positive note' (no11 to be precise): "...it's over; you may never have to do another project...in the present day, the 'building' is a rarity...the wonderful paradox is...few people have been trained to cultivate the encompassing imaginative powers that architects possess." ●

Paul Clarke

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